

Quick Facts

About... Viral Meningitis

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis, also called aseptic meningitis, is an infection of the covering of the brain and spinal cord caused by a virus. While viral meningitis can occur at any time of the year, it occurs most often in late summer or early fall. Viral meningitis can be caused by different viruses and is usually less severe than bacterial meningitis.

What are the signs of being sick with this disease?

Symptoms of viral meningitis include:

- fever,
- severe headache,
- stiff neck,
- drowsiness or confusion,
- red rash, or
- nausea and vomiting.

In babies, the symptoms are more difficult to identify but may include:

- fever,
- fretfulness or irritability,
- poor appetite, or
- difficulty in waking the baby.

In the early stages of meningitis, the symptoms of viral and bacterial meningitis may be the same. Early antibiotic treatment is necessary for recovery from bacterial meningitis but is not useful for viral meningitis. Therefore, it is extremely important for anyone with these symptoms to consult a health care provider right away. Viral meningitis is serious but rarely fatal. Symptoms usually last 7-10 days, and most people make a full recovery.

How is viral meningitis spread?

Because viral meningitis can be caused by different viruses, it can be spread a variety of ways. Some ways that viral meningitis can be spread include:

- coughing or sneezing in someone's face
- not washing hands after using the toilet
- sharing eating or drinking utensils with an infected person
- kissing an infected person

If you are a contact of someone with viral meningitis, you have a small chance of actually developing meningeal symptoms. Most people infected with the virus develop only mild illness, such as a cold or rash.

How is viral meningitis diagnosed?

Your health care provider may perform a spinal tap to obtain spinal fluid to rule out bacterial meningitis. The virus causing the illness can be identified by growing the virus from a sample of the spinal fluid, but this specific test is not done very often.

How is the disease treated?

Since the infection is caused by a virus, antibiotics do not cure viral meningitis. Doctors often recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids, and medications to help relieve some of the symptoms.

Who is at highest risk for getting the disease?

Although anyone can get viral meningitis, it occurs more often in children.

Can viral meningitis be prevented?

As with most infectious diseases, the risk for viral meningitis can be reduced by good personal hygiene. It is important to clean your hands regularly, especially after:

- coughing or sneezing
- before and after caring for a sick person
- after using the toilet or changing diapers

It is very important to teach children to clean their hands often and properly, using soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Another way to prevent viral meningitis is to avoid sharing eating utensils and/or drink containers.

Is there a vaccine that can prevent this disease?

There is not a vaccine that prevents all types of viral meningitis. However, there are vaccines to prevent a few viruses that can cause viral meningitis, so it is important that children's immunizations remain current.

For additional information on viral (aseptic) meningitis, please visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at:

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/submenu/sub_meningitis.htm

October 22, 2008

